DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 252 615 UD 023 989

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TITLE Undergraduate Survey of Black Undergraduate Students Attending Predominantly White, State-Supported Universities. Preliminary Report: 1982.
INSTITUTION Michigan Univ., Ann Arbor. Center for Afroamerican and African Studies.
SPONS AGENCY Ford Foundation, New York, N.Y.; Mott (C.S.) Foundation, Flint, Mich.
PUB DATE Oct 84
NOTE 19p.; For related documents, see UD 023 988 and UD 023 990.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Academic Aspiration; *Black Attitudes; *Black Students; *College Freshmen; Educational Background; Educational Environment; Higher Education; Racial Discrimination; Racial Relations; Self Concept; *State Colleges; Student Adjustment; *Student Characteristics; *Student College Relationship; Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

This report discusses the results of a survey of the characteristics and the social and academic experiences of black undergraduates at eight predominantly white and regionally diverse State college campuses. The majority of the students sampled were freshmen. Major findings are that: (1) black undergraduates did not report markedly unpleasant or decidedly pleasant experiences; overall, students reported on the quality of interaction with white faculty, staff, and students as being slightly better than neutral; (2) most black students encountered some form of racial discrimination on these campuses. These data suggest that the students felt a certain tenuousness in their position on campus. Evidence of this feeling can be found in the fact that the students evaluated interactions with blacks on campus extremely positively, felt that there were not enough blacks in any role on campus, and felt that blacks were not fully a part of campus life. This feeling of their tenuous status no doubt partially accounts for the just above average academic performance of a student group that survey results showed to be ambitious, committed, and equipped with sound college preparation. It could also help account for their sense of alienation from campus life. To alleviate this situation, universities must expand efforts to bring in black faculty, staff, and students, and take more steps to address black students' experience of estrangement. (RDN)

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ED252615

Preliminary Report: 1982 Undergraduate Survey of Black Undergraduate Students Attending Predominantly White, State-Supported Universities

October 1984

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UD02 989

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This study of Black student characteristics, experiences and achievements in higher education was funded by grants from the Ford and Mott Foundations. This report is the third in a series of reports. Please address any inquiries to: The National Study of Black College Students, 909 Monroe, Room 207/407 Lorch Hall, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109.

Introduction

Blacks are now a significant presence, if still underrepresented, on many of the nation's major college campuses. As more and more Black students have the opportunity to attend major colleges, colleges with large, predominantly white student bodies, the need for research on the problems and difficulties and the successes and achievements of Blacks in such environments will grow. The present report discusses the results of a survey of Black undergraduates on eight major college campuses. The issues raised in the survey and in this report range from simple background information like the educational attainments of the students' parents to questions on the quality of interaction between Black students and white university faculty and staff.

The sample of students was drawn from eight predominantly white, state supported campuses (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; Eastern Michigan University; University of Wisconsin, Madison; University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Memphis State University; Arizona State University; University of California, Los Angeles; and State University of New York, Stony Brook). As is evident, the sample covers campuses in the far west, the midwest, the south, and one campus in the east. The sample for each campus was selected from computerized lists of newly enrolled freshman and transfer students supplied by the Registrars' office at participating universities. The sample is thus disproportionately composed of freshman (57%). The sampling procedure stratified students by year of enrollment and employed interval selection within grade levels to choose respondents. Mail-back questionnaires were sent

to a total of 2,613 Black undergraduates of which 902 were returned for an overall response rate of 35%.

The scope of the study was broad. The questionnaire asked a number of background questions concerning parents, siblings, community of socialization, high school experiences, and so on. There were a large number of questions on experiences at the college level. A series of questions pertained to the type, extent, and quality of relations between Black students and the white faculty, students, and staff at the students' university. There were also questions on relations with Black faculty, students, and staff. Students were asked to report on their academic activities and achievements, their sense of involvement on campus, satisfaction with different university services, and participation in Black organizations on campus. More generally, students were asked about their own aspirations, sense of self-esteem, group consciousness and the like. It is with this rich and varied data on the background, experiences, aspirations, and actual achievements of a diverse population of Black undergraduates that we hope to better comprehend the situation of Black students on predominantly white campuses.

Student Background

The students in our sample come mainly from stable, well-educated, middle class families. Sixty-two percent of the students reported having lived with both natural parents while growing-up. Most of the students, 72%,

came from families with 4 or fewer children. The average reported family income was $26,400.00. Just over a quarter of the parents (26% of the fathers and 28% of the mothers) were college graduates. Forty- six percent of the students had fathers with some college or more and 51% of students had mothers with some college education or more. The siblings were similarly well-educated. Sixty-five percent of the sample had at least one sibling with education beyond high school, with nearly a third, 30%, having a sibling who had completed a BA or a more advanced degree.

The students in our sample come from larger cities and attended relatively large high schools. Sixty-percent of the sample said they spent most of their lives in medium to large size cities. Only 7% were from rural areas, and just under a third, 30%, had grown-up in smaller cities or towns. Forty-seven percent of the students came from high schools with 1,000 or fewer students, 36% from schools with populations between 1,000 and 2,500 students, and 17% from schools with more than 2,500 students. Fifty percent went to schools less than 40% Black. Of those who attended high schools with 40% or more Black enrollment, 43% went to schools that were virtaully all Black (over 80% Black). Although many of the students had experience with integrated high schools, only 1 in 5 (17%) went to high schools where Blacks made up 10% or less of the student body.

The students reported having been fairly well prepared academically for college. In terms of high school class ranking, 19% reported themselves to rank in the upper 5% of their senior class. Twenty-nine percent said they were in the upper 10%, 24% said they were in the upper twentieth, and 28% were

in the top thirtieth or lower. The average high school GPA for the sample, based on self-reports, was 3.2 or just above a B average. Females had slightly higher GPAs than males, 3.3 as opposed to 3.1. When asked to evaluate the quality of their respective high schools, many students, 41%, ranked them as "very good." Fourteen percent gave their schools the highest ranking of "excellent," 38% said "good," and 7% gave the lowest ranking of "poor." Yet, most students, 62%, said their high school teachers probably evaluated them as being "average." This compares to 36% who thought their high school teachers' evaluations of them to have been "above average" or "high."

The students reported a high degree of commitment to academic achievement and high aspirations for themselves more generally. For example, when asked why they chose to attend a particular university, academic reputation (34%) was the most frequently cited reason. Academic reputation was followed in prevalence by location (18%), and next financial considerations (15%). Also, 74% said that getting a college degree was "extremely important" to them. In fact, only 36% of the sample expected to stop their education at a bachelor's degree. Thirty-one percent aspired to master's degrees and 33% intended to seek more advanced academic, business, or professional degrees. Most students, 53%, aspired to being "recognized as one of the top persons" in their chosen profession.

These high aspirations were matched by high levels of self-esteem. Sixty-three perecent of the students expressed "above average" or "high" levels of self-confidence. Most students, 57%, thought they were above

average or high in leadership abilities. And 76% said that overall they were high or above average people.

In sum, the Black undergraduates in our sample come from stable, middle class families with a tradition of commitment to higher education. These students are likely to have experienced some degree of integration at their respective high schools, but not many attended schools where Blacks were the overwhelming minority. The students assess themselves as having been generally well prepared for college academically and they have very high personal aspirations. We now turn a consideration of just how these middle class, ambitious Blacks have fared on predominantly white college campuses.

The College Experience

Relations with Faculty, Staff, and Students

Students reported neither very negative nor very positive relations with white university faculty and staff. This ambivalence holds for perceptions of the overall quality of relations between Black students and white faculty and staff, and for reports of personal experiences (though there is a clear tendency to evaluate personal experiences more positively). Forty-one percent of the students felt that white faculty "sometimes" had difficulty relating to Black students, 61%, reported that white faculty "seldom" or "never" avoided interaction with Black students. Indeed, out of 7 questions dealing with student evaluations of relations with white faculty,

only 2% of the sample responded negatively across all 7 questions, compared to 11% who responded positively to all 7 questions. When the 7 questions were scaled--a score of 1 indicating consistently negative responses and a score of 15 indicating consistently positive responses--the average score was approximately 10, suggesting largely but not extremely positive assessments of relations with white faculty.

Evaluations of relations with white university staff were similar to those for faculty. Of the five questions concerning relations with white university staff, 4% responded negatively to all five, and 17% responded positively to all five. When the five staff relations questions were scaled, a score of 1 indicating all negative replies and a score of 11 all positive replies, the average rating for the sample was just above 7. Assessments of relations with white students also show neither extremely positive nor extremely negative evaluations. For instance, when asked if white students treat Blacks as equals, 7% said "always," 70% said "sometimes" or "often," and 23% gave the more negative responses of "seldom" or "never." Overall, 2% of the students responded negatively to all five student relations questions and 9% responded positively to all five questions. When these questions were scaled, 1 negative and 11 positive, the average score was approximately 7.

These generally, though not exclusively, positive assessments of relations with white faculty, staff, and students should be qualified by three related findings. First, the students in our sample, by overwhelming margins, felt that there were insufficient numbers of Black faculty (97%), staff (89%), and students (87%) on their respective campuses. The feeling on the part of

Black students that there was an insufficient Black presence on campus is especially important because these students gave more positive evaluations of their relations with other Blacks at the university. Sixty-five percent rated their relations with Black faculty as "good" or "excellent," 70% gave similar ratings of relations with other Black students. Indeed, fully 57% of the students responded positively to all 3 questions on relations with other Blacks at the university, with only 2% giving consistently negative responses.

Secondly, a quite substantial number, 65% of the sample, reported having encountered racial discrimination on campus. More males than females, 71 versus 61%, reported having encountered discrimination. Although most of those who had encountered it, 50%, felt that discrimination occured only "seldom" or "hardly ever," 37% said it took place "sometimes" and 12% thought it occured "often" or "very often." Discrimination most often took the form of some subtle slight or put down. Forty-one percent of those who had experienced discrimination reported that through some subtle intimation, gesture, act, or veiled remark they had been discriminated against because they were Black. A common experience involved the Black student being treated in a manner that implied that s/he did not legitimately belong or "fit in" on campus.

> "The way whites look at you, and how the teachers always remember who you are, because you are the only Black."
>
> "When me and my friends attended a party, the people in charge kept checking us for identification, on whether we [paid] to get in or for food we wanted."

> "[The] supervisor in the library acts as if she doesn't want to serve Blacks. Also professors overlooking [Blacks] students when their hands are raised for questions."

These more subtle acts were not the only form discrimination took.

> "One day I wanted some change but all the change machines in the area were out of order. So, I went to one or two places. I was told by a girl and a man in one of the places that they had no change. So, I asked a white girl if she could change a dollar and she went in the same place I had just left and got change."

> "I was in a class and the class was going to discuss racial discrimination the next time the class was to meet. Only 8 people came to class. Of the people who came, all were Black, out of about 50 to 55 people. [The] same thing happen[ed] the following 2 days: [The class] never did discuss discrimination."

A number of those who experienced discrimination, 18%, cited derogatory remarks made by whites as the problem. These derogatory remarks most frequently took the form of a car full of joy riding white males shouting racial epithets.

> "Being called a nigger by a group of silly white boys riding by in car."

> "Some drunks driving in the car after a football victory yelling 'Nigga.'"

But sometimes, authority figures made the remarks.

> "At a class discussion on affirmative action [the teaching assistant] wanted to know why he had to pay for the sins of his great-grandfather. [He said] Blacks were lowering prestige".

> "I feel very defensive in psychology classes when the teacher speaks about the intelligence of [Black] people [as] lower than whites. I feel forced to say something to defend the Black race."

There were no differences by gender in the reported frequency of discrimination, type of discriminatory act, or person committing the act (a student, faculty or staff member, or some other person).

No doubt the experience of discrimination and the feeling that there weren't enough Black faculty, staff, or students contributed to the belief that Blacks were not fully a part of campus life. Most of the students, 54%, reported feeling only "very little" or "not at all" a part of the general campus life. Just 11% expressed a feeling of "considerable" involvement. Evaluations of campus extracurricular activities were more positive. Forty-five percent felt that their interests were at least "somewhat" reflected in campus activities. Seventeen percent said campus activities were a "considerable" reflection of their interests, whereas 38% gave the more negative replies of only "very little" or "not at all" reflective of their interests.

In the light of these results it is no surprise that many Blacks reported involvement with Black organizations on their respective campuses. Thirty-nine percent reported that they "often" or "very often" participated in activities sponsored by their campuses Black organizations. Another 30% reported being "somewhat" involved, and 30% said they were "hardly ever" involved.

Academic Environment

The academic environment at these universities was perceived as demanding. Fully 43% of the sample said that the level of academic competition at their university was "extremely intense." A substantial

number, 37%, said the competition was "above average" or of lesser intensity. Students did not, however, report negative evaluations of the level of competitiveness. A majority, 54%, reported "positive" or "very postitive" feelings about the level of academic competition. Thirty-four percent reported "neutral" feelings, and 12% gave "negative" or "very negative" evaluations. Although males and females did not differ in their perceptions of the level of academic competition, females were less likely than males 49% as compared to 62%, to feel positively about the level of competition.

Students responded to the pressures of academic competition by working hard themselves. Students reported spending an average of 15 hours per week in the classroom and another 13 per week studying. Additionally, of those students who received academic advising, 66% reported being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the help they received. And of those students who made use of tutorial or remedial services, 56% thought the services provided had been "helpful" or "very helpful."

Nonetheless, students still seemed to face some obstacles. The average reported GPA of 2.4 is not only below a B average, but is nearly one full point below the average GPA while in high school. Additionally, the gap between-females and males found at the high school level is no longer present, indicating that females sustained a larger drop in GPA when they moved to college than did males. Also, most students, 66%, reported that their professors' evaluations of them as students were "average." Twenty-nine percent said their professor's evaluations of them were "above average" or the "highest", and just 5% said "below average."

Many students, 47%, reported that they had considered leaving their present university. A higher percentage of females than males, 50 as compared to 42%, had thought about leaving. (This difference may be attributable to the fact that females GPAs declined more as they entered college and to their less positive reactions to the level of academic competition.) Overall, the reason most frequently cited for leaving pertained to academic problems (34%). Additionally, 16% of those who had considered leaving school cited social isolation as the reason, and another 12% gave financial difficulties as the reason.

Among those who cited academic problems as a reason for considering leaving, a typical explanation was that the demands at the college level proved to be more than expected.

> "The pressures of work load. I wasn't sure I could handle the amount of work they were giving me in engineering and also the competiton."
>
> "The state of being humiliated at first. But I decided than no one or anything could prevent me from finishing what I had started."

Students explained the sense of social isolation as follows:

> "I feel somewhat overlooked (or left-out) in this white university. I think I would rather attend a [B]lack university."
>
> "The environmental pressure from students and one or two faculty members. The drive for competition rather than knowledge. The large size of university with its impersonal environment."
>
> ". . . the feeling of isolation I experience at times. . . the absence of more [B]lack students on campus."

Students were also asked what they preceived to be "the most serious problems and difficulties," academic or otherwise, encountered by Black

students at their university. The most frequent responses pertained to racism (23%), academic pressures (21%), and problems of cultural adjustment (18%). With respect to racism, many students thought that "discrimination" and "racial prejudice" were major problems. But, as the comments of one student suggests, these problems were not always of blatant sort:

> "White students here are not overtly friendly to [B]lacks. Most professors treat [B]lacks equally, but there is virtually no social interaction between whites and [B]lacks on campus. This will make it more difficult to relate [to] whites once [off] of campus in a white-dominated working world."

In addition to explicity racial concerns, students emphasized the need to be prepared for the academic pressures, the need to "keep up the grades." Academic pressures too, however, had a racial component. One student said that Blacks may be

> ". . .faced with more severe competition than they are accustomed to, [and] feelings of alienation [from] an all white staff in all white classes! There are so few [B]lacks that they feel restricted."

Another student commented that:

> "Many [B]lack students feel inferior to other students because their grade point average is not as high. But they do not realize that many of the white students came from a high school that had the money to produce a highly academic and respectable educational program."

The remarks of some students emphasized that the most serious problem Black students would face was the task of cultural adjustment. As might be expected, this "cultural adjustment" pertained mainly to moving from a high school dominated by Blacks to a predominantly white university.

"Students dealing with [a] white majority after going to predominantly [B]lack high schools."

"Since there are over 20,000 students at this university, and only about 1,500 [B]lacks, we must face the problem of being accepted. We worry about being discriminated against."

"Adapting to [a] white middle class setting."

The overall sense of these comments is that race, at least for Black students, is an unavoidable concern. Indeed, it is a concern that has the potential to manifest itself in the form of overt discrimination and hostility, akward interactions, inadequate preparation, or a quite general feeling of alienation from the surrounding social environment.

Conclusions

It is difficult to offer strong conclusions or recommendations for change on the basis of a report such as this. Our primary aims were to describe the study and the students in our sample, and to describe in broad terms the social and academic experiences of Black students at eight major, predominantly white universities. Nonetheless, several general themes of special signficance are worthy of further elaboration. First, Black undergraduates in these environments do not report markedly unpleasant or decidedly pleasant experiences. Evaluations of relations with white faculty, staff, and students tended to be positive, but never strongly so. This positive tilt should be modified by the fact that evaluations of people tend always to be positive (see Sears 1983). If we temper our findings in the

light of this general psychological tendency or "positivity bias" then, Black students reports on the quality of interaction with white faculty, staff, and students were a bit better than neutral.

Second, most Black students do (or will) encounter some form of racial discrimination on these campuses. To be sure, even those students who do not encounter racism personally are quite likely to know of a fellow student who has. This discrimination, unfortunately, tends to be manifested in ways that currently existing programs probably do not address. Thus, students who feel they have been harassed in some way on campus because of their race, or who feel that a figure of authority like a professor has behaved in a racist manner have few avenues of recourse.

Certainly the main thrust of these two considerations is that Black students on white campuses, to at least some extent, are caught in an uncertain and sometimes trying status. Our data suggest that Black students on predominantly white campuses feel a certain tenuousness, as if their presence constituted a vulnerable foothold. Evidence of this feeling can be found in the extremely postive evaluations students give their interactions with Blacks on campus, whether they be faculty, staff, or students; in the quite ubiquitous sentiment that there were not enough Blacks in any role on campus; and in the expressed general feeling that Blacks were not fully a part of campus life.

The apparent sense that Blacks have a somewhat uneasy and trying status on these predominantly white campuses is no doubt part of the reason that such ambitious and committed students, students with apparently solid

college preparation, report just above average performance academically. It is surely connected as well, to the reported sense of alienation from campus life.

One implication of these results is that universities need to continue and expand efforts to bring in Black faculty, staff, and students. A more substantial Black presence on such campuses would likely to be of benefit to white students as well as Blacks. A second implication is that universities should take more steps to address the sense of estrangement that Black students are likely to experience. As it stands now, students who feel isolated must, by and large, seek out help on their own rather than turning to institutionalized sources of support and redress.

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